

Editorial

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Five years old and the way forward

In the April 1995 number of *SAJG* (Volume 4, Number 1) I pondered whether after three volumes, a journal which has no precedent in southern Africa could rightfully be regarded as having come of age. Two years and two volumes of *SAJG* later, I suggest, perhaps presumptuously, that the journal has reached maturity. However, bold as I have been thusfar, the way forward is less clear in terms of ensuring that *SAJG* remains relevant and responsive to the interest areas and information needs of its readers.

A journal can only be as good as the quality and variety of the papers which authors submit for consideration for placement in the journal; the constructiveness and usefulness of reviewers' comments; the expertise, representativeness and involvement of the editorial advisory panel; and the feedback which the editors receive from readers. There is a need to constantly review the progress of the journal. At the end of *SAJG*'s first quinquennium it is therefore apposite to take stock of its achievements and shortcomings, and to consider how it may be improved to have wider appeal and greater relevance for gerontologists in Africa.

Five-year editorial review

The first step towards taking stock was to invite the Editorial Advisory Panel members to evaluate the journal's content, format, relevance and growth over its first five years of publication. Broadly, the panel members rated the content and relevance of *SAJG* as being of good international standard, pertinent and useful. They also referred to the wide disciplinary range of topics covered in the journal. Some members suggested areas in which its relevance might be strengthened: by making it more multidisciplinary, e.g. including biomedical papers; by giving it a more "hands-on" emphasis, e.g. including more practice concepts; by including more academic and philosophical overviews; and by including papers from more African countries, i.e. countries outside southern Africa. Panel members' suggestions regarding the journal's content included being more selective in the acceptance of papers: covering topics of interest to practitioners; and compiling more special issues. A panel member pointed out the advantage of inviting authors to contribute to a special issue on a relevant theme, which enables the editors to ensure the quality and relevance of the papers, whereas there is less opportunity for this when an open submission process is followed.

The members spontaneously commented on the high editorial standard of *SAJG* and the spread of countries covered by the papers. On editorial policy and format, a member stated: "*SAJG* looks, feels and reads like a serious journal whilst treating extremely useful specifics in a manner easy to assimilate." On its future growth, another member noted: "As ageing in Africa grows, *SAJG* will grow and get even better." Several members referred to the small pool of researchers on

ageing in Africa and concluded that few research papers would therefore be available to the journal.

Regarding the composition of the Editorial Advisory Panel, in general the members felt that more African countries should be represented on the panel; alternatively, that the panel should be composed of more researchers and gerontologists who are based in Africa.

Other stock-taking

The panel's evaluation of the journal was extremely positive and encouraging – but possibly biased. We therefore considered the members' comments and suggestions together with the realities which a scientific gerontology journal faces on the subcontinent. Basic matters that must first be addressed in an evaluation of the journal are its relevance and utility. We want the journal to be accessible and do not aim it at an elite readership. The journal must have usefulness and value, i.e. much of the research information in *SAJG* must be translatable into applied gerontology. Up to now, the editors have received very few papers from field professionals, practitioners or applied gerontologists. Certainly, we would prefer that at least half of the papers in each number deal with areas of applied gerontology.

A journal depends on both the standards of the authors of papers and the comments of the reviewers of the papers, whereby the authors can revise and improve the papers for publication. In the early stages of the journal's life numerous papers were reviewed by experts in countries overseas and the papers and *SAJG* greatly benefitted from the reviewers' skills and guidance. At this stage of the development of gerontological research in southern Africa there is a paucity of skilled reviewers in the region. Although reviewers who are approached are very willing to review papers and in the main submit well-considered, constructive and helpful comments, some are inexperienced at reviewing, apparently do not grasp what is required of a reviewer, lack the ability to review, and therefore are not helpful to the authors or the editors.

A third problem lies where reviewers' comments are sent to an author and the author may disagree with the comments, and feel discouraged and perhaps incensed. Although encouraged to revise and resubmit the paper, only about half of authors do so. It may help authors and readers to know that each paper published in *SAJG* has been revised at least once and usually two or three times by the author(s).

A fourth reality with which *SAJG* has to deal is the relatively limited disciplinary range of topics covered in the papers that are submitted for placement. The vast majority of papers deal with social science related topics; very few papers are received on biomedical and clinical studies and on large-scale surveys and the results of quantitative analyses. Unfortunately, an impression has been created that such papers are not

accommodated in the journal. On the contrary, papers on these topics are invited and encouraged.

Finally, we find generally that few authors satisfactorily describe their research design, including their sampling procedure, in their papers. As a rule of thumb, authors should pay attention to arguing logically, and considering whether their central research question and argument make a contribution to knowledge – and specifically advance the state of knowledge in Africa.

SAJG is a SAPSE-accredited journal (scientific journals which are accredited by the South African Post-Secondary Education department offer incentives to authors at South African tertiary institutions to have papers published in these journals) and therefore has to maintain the high, exacting standards required for this accreditation.

Readers' views and a new panel

The current three-year term of office of the Editorial Advisory Panel ends in December 1997 and a new panel will be appointed early in 1998 to serve for the coming triennium. In keeping with South Africa's new democratic style, nominations are invited from readers of persons who may be considered for appointment to the new panel. Details for the submission of nominations appear in this number of *SAJG*.

Readers are also invited to submit their views on the journal – its format, content, relevance and the range of topics that are covered, as well as the paper submission and review procedures. The editors aim to make the journal as relevant and useful to its audience as possible and need readers' input.

This issue

A variety of papers covering interesting and relevant topics and emanating from several countries are included in this number.

Togonu-Bickersteth examines levels of satisfaction with care received from sons and daughters of older Yoruba in rural Nigeria. She finds that contrary to expectations, older women are more satisfied than older men with the assistance

received from children. **Makoni** examines the effects of Alzheimer's disease as the disease progresses on the conversational ability of an older second-language speaker. **Cattell** reports on exploratory research among Zulu grandmothers and granddaughters in KwaZulu-Natal and finds that older women continue to have important roles in the socialization of granddaughters, especially regarding sexual behaviour.

Van Dokkum makes out a case for a durable power of attorney, not yet provided for in South African legislation, which can help to protect older citizens against malpractices or exploitation when, because of impaired mental functioning, they are no longer able to look after their affairs. **Lefroy** gives an update on the Special Dementia Unit as an alternative residential care facility for afflicted older Australians and examines the advantages of this type of accommodation for individuals, their families and society.

Finally, **Møller** reviews a book written by Nana Araba Apt of Ghana, entitled *Coping with old age in a changing Africa*. She concludes that readers will learn much from Apt's ideas on building on indigenous institutions to meet the challenges of ageing in Africa.

Forthcoming special issue

The October 1997 number of *SAJG* (Volume 6, Number 2) will be a special issue on "Ageing in urban and rural Africa." The number will comprise research papers read at the Third Global Conference of the International Federation on Ageing (IFA), to be held in Durban in October 1997, which deal with the situation of older urban and/or rural dwellers in any African country. Authors who plan to read a paper at the conference on original research in Africa and who are interested in submitting the paper for consideration for publication in the special issue are invited to contact the Editor for details as soon as possible. Manuscripts must reach the Editor by 15 September 1997. The publication of the October 1997 number of *SAJG* may be delayed by four to five weeks so that the conference papers can be finalised and included in the number.